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ABSTRACT

This brief report summarizes a longer document with the same title. It explains that institutions of higher education have a moral responsibility as disseminators of knowledge to foster proper values and ethical thinking in its students for the well-being of society. The collegiate ethos, the practices and customs of the institution, are important in fostering responsibility for individual and social welfare. The scholar's role is crucial because of his or her power to define reality for and exercise control over society in general and students in particular. Often ethical problems exist due to the competing needs of the various roles inherent in the scholar, involving teaching, discovery, application, and integration. To assist in dealing with these problems, the institution itself must take a leadership role by: properly formulating mission statements based on ethical practices and concerns; fostering collaboration among all faculty, administrators, staff, and students to work with the values necessary for institutional effectiveness and overall integrity; and employing the use of models of ethical decision making. The academic environment must foster the importance of human dignity, nourishment of growth and achievement, and respect of others. Such an environment is defined as a learning community. Contains 10 references. (GLR)

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The Leadership Compass Values and Ethics in Higher Education

John R. Wilcox and Susan L. Ebbs

What Is the Impetus for Assessing the Values and Ethics of Higher Education?

Colleges and universities are custodians of knowledge. Because the possession of knowledge is the source of *power*, understood here as the ability to influence decisions in contemporary society, these institutions are also the gateway to power, significantly affecting the quality of economic and social life throughout the world. Thus, insofar as colleges and universities create and disseminate knowledge within a particular society, they are institutions with *moral* responsibilities to maintain the well-being of that society.

Why Is the Collegiate Ethos So Important to Values and Ethics in Higher Education?

The role of the higher education professional should be looked at by means of ethical analysis more broadly conceived than scrutinizing campus ethical dilemmas under the microscope of ethical theories. Of cardinal importance is the impact of *ethos*–customs, practices, and institutional contexts–on the quality of life and on the ability to sustain a connected view of things characterized by loyalty, commitment, and love (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Palmer 1987). With a focus on the ethos of higher education, any normative discussion of ethics–and of values–takes place within the broader contexts of organizational structure and society.

What Is an Ethics of the Ethos?

Morality is not an issue only when problems arise. Responsibility for individual and social welfare is part of the institutional landscape, a daily occurrence manifested in decision making on all levels of the college or university and in the goals toward which the decision making is directed. An ethical analysis that highlights the interconnectedness of all elements in the institution–an ethics of ethos–brings to attention the complexity of the moral life and the subtle nature of responsibility in higher education.

What Dimensions of Higher Education Merit Attention?

The professoriat

Work in academic life, like any other kind of work, is laden with values and has a moral dimension that emerges from the ethical reflection characteristic of institutional self-scrutiny. Students are vulnerable before and unequal to the scholar; trust must characterize faculty-student relationships. Ultimately, however, professorial knowledge is not proprietary but communal, dedicated to the welfare of society through the transmission and extension of knowledge. The role of the scholar can be conceived in four phases: teaching, discovery, application, and integration, each of which has its own ethical assumptions and problems (Boyer 1990). Often the competing needs of these roles cause conflicts for the scholar teacher/researcher. In responding to these problems, the scholar must balance individual with group realities and requirements. An important pedagogical conception to help achieve the balance is the learning community.

Leadership

Leadership in higher education continues to be under intense pressure to respond to societal issues resulting from trends in demographics and enrollment and economic and social forces that bring both possible disruption and/or opportunity. The use of values expressed by the mission statement and ethical reflection as resources in decision making can positively affect the institution's ability to respond to complex decisions about funding and the budget.

Models of ethical decision making help inform the practice of successful leadership in the face of ever-increasing complexities in higher education. These models have in common the process of defining the issues, making decisions by reviewing alternatives based on intuitive evaluation or on ethical rules and principles, deciding whether to carry out the action, and then implementing it using the best deliberative judgment.

Student life

Students on today's campuses encounter a variety of complex situations for which they are often ill-prepared by experience or individual development. The relationship between students' attitudes and values and the environment that supports or challenges them stands as a dynamic dialectic of confirmation and rejection that affects the ethical positions and choices of both the individual and the institution. The distinctive nature of the institutional ethos affects the values and interests manifested in the campus climate and the overall effect of the college experience on the student.

Issues facing higher education, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, substance abuse, and academic dishonesty, argue for the pursuit of an ethical environment that consistently asserts the importance of human dignity, nourishes growth and achievement, and insists on respect in interpersonal communication and relations.

What Direction Does an Ethics of the Ethos Provide?

The literature detailing the immorality of individual actions or policies underscores a more pervasive problem in higher education: the lack of community and the lack of a sense of shared values that give direction and purpose (Bellah et al. 1985, 1991). Strategic planning for the future must emphasize the learning community as the institutionalization of a program that responds to concern for values and ethics in higher education (Gabelnick et al. 1990).

What Is the Learning Community?

The learning community can be provisionally construed as an ideal type of higher education culture that seeks to overcome current tendencies toward individual alienation and intellectual fragmentation with regard to present academic specialization and special interests. The learning community does not deny the value of research or the scholar's freedom of inquiry, but, as a moral community, it does seek to organize them within an ethical domain of connectedness and mutual responsibility.

Why Is the Learning Community So Important?

The learning community embraces a distinctive ethos, one that is laden with values and sustains the only fitting context for ethical analysis. Based on the curriculum, the learning community addresses many important concerns already touched on. The learning community enables faculty who feel isolated by the limits of their discipline and miss the richness they knew so well in graduate school to reach out to other disciplines. At the same time, learning communities address the growing diversity among students in terms of age, race, ethnicity, religion, and marital and enrollment status. Most important, the learning community allows for a wide variety of applications, not simply application in the small liberal arts college.

In many ways, the learning community brings together the themes of leadership, faculty, and students. Leadership is essential to colleges' and universities' sensitivity to values in higher education. The learning community symbolizes the delicate nature of that task. At the same time, collaboration among faculty in this learning project is of the essence. Such communities can bring out the best in faculty and resolve several of the tensions faculty face in their careers, especially the tension between research and teaching. Community gives direction to students and anchors their collegiate experience in the intellectual life (Astin 1985). Only such an approach will do justice to the complexity of ethical issues facing higher education.

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